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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to gain an understanding of the relationship between a gay male's low self-esteem and environmental oppression, thereby establishing guidelines for the counselor in directing the client toward a more positive gay identity. This document is divided into the following sections: (1) Initial Interview; (2) Theory of Rational-Emotive Therapy; (3) Cognitive Aspect of RE-T in Practice; (4) Irrational Beliefs and Environmental Oppression; and (5) Counseling Considerations. (Author/JLL)

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GUIDELINES FOR COUNSELING GAY MALES WITH LOW SELF-ESTEEM

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J519: Introduction to Guidance Services

Dr. Rose Gibson

August 3, 1977

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Only since most recently has there been a rash of publications aimed at representing more accurate information on the gay male identity than in the past; undoubtedly, this can be viewed as a divergent outcome of the gay liberation movement. This current literary trend has unfortunately been confined to such topics as gay oppression and the "coming out" experience; these subject areas have received more extensive treatment than the intrapsychic and interpersonal difficulties experienced by gay males, as a result of finding themselves oppressed by institutions and social discrimination. Even more discernible in today's gay literature is the inadequate development of specific counseling guidelines, which facilitate the growth of positive regard for gay feelings among gay male clients. For these reasons, the purpose of this study was to gain an understanding of the relationship between a gay male's low self-esteem and environmental oppression, thereby establishing guidelines for the counselor in directing the client towards a more positive gay identity.

As a telephone counselor for a gay male advocate organization, I have found that a negative gay identity is uniquely experienced; vis-a-vis, resistence to sexual as well as socio-emotional expressions vary in intensity, and individuals differ in their reaction to specific forms of environmental oppression (an umbrella term). Nevertheless, the following telephone interview is pre-

sented to illustrate the counselor's initial task of stimulating the client to discuss a concern that subsequently "dare not speak its name". While it is important for the counselor to respond with unconditional positive regard towards the client's disclosure, active involvement can be a valuable approach in helping the client overcome his inhibited thoughts/feelings.

Initial Interview[1]

Client: I've been having a dream that I thought maybe I should talk about with someone.

Counselor: Has this dream been recurrent?

Cl: Yeah. It has been recurring for about the past few days.

Co: What is the dream about?

Cl: A guy is sticking this pole up me...(pauses)

Co: Mm-hmm.

Cl: (continues to hisitate)

Co: Does anything else happen?

Cl: I can remember very clearly lying on my stomach on a gym mat...

Co: Mm-hmm.

Cl: ...and the guy tells me he's going to continue until I squeal.

Co: How were you feeling about this?

Cl: I don't know.

Co: What does "squeal" mean to you? Anything?

Cl: I'm not sure...

[1]Interviewed by Alec Nagorski (Gay Hotline: Ann Arbor, Mich.), 1:15 P.M., July 11, 1977.

Co: Uh-huh... The reason I asked is because to me "squeal" suggests a reaction of pain and discomfort, but this is only my interpretation.

Cl: (no response)

Co: When you think about how oppressive our institutions are towards gay people...how we are socialized to view sodomy as being "wrong", it is understandable that your dream could make you feel very frightened.

Cl: I don't feel afraid of it... It has been in the back of my mind for some time now.

Co: Have you had any experiences in your life which may in some way be related to your dream?

At this point, the client's specific difficulty began to surface, which was initially presented in rather vague terms. Considering that dream analysis typically requires a considerable time duration before interpretations are possible, it is conceivable that the client may have conjured this "dream" as a strategy of testing how his real difficulty would be received by the counselor. Further evidence supports this contention: in response to the counselor's inquiry of related past experiences, the client was able to immediately recollect an account of a fellow employee who, in discovering the client's inexperience of sodomy, expressed a desire to anally penetrate the client until he squealed--an incredibly expedient "free association". In any event, by helping the client clarify the nature of his difficulty, followed by modeling an interpretation of the "dream" and expressing an empathic understanding of

gay oppression, the client later became more relaxed and spontaneous in conveying his ambivalent feelings towards having anal intercourse.

Four days later, the client informed the counselor of further developments related to his difficulty. Expressing more recent fantasies of wanting to be paddled, and his strong desire to have sexual relations with youth whom he found himself attracted to, he asked if there was a way to "cool down" these urges. The counselor explained that, while he may choose to avoid acting upon his sexual fantasies, these urges will remain in "the back of his mind" until they are experienced and satisfied. Sensing the client's frustration at not having his needs met, and understanding that these were limited to sexual rather than also socio-emotional needs, the client's interpersonal involvement with gay people became the focal point.

It was discovered that he had never indulged in the "gay scene"; neither his sexual nor socio-emotional attraction towards gay males had ever been fulfilled in real life--only fantasies. Denying himself of gay experiences, and seeking to avoid his gay thoughts/feelings, suggest a difficulty in accepting his gay identity. Often such a "closet" homosexual fears self-affirmation and exposure, and when he does have a sexual encounter with another man, he may limit the encounter to a sexual function while failing to acknowledge any close inter-

personal involvement.[2] Internalizing the values/beliefs of an oppressive environment understandably play a significant role in causing a homosexual to view himself with low positive regard.

Theory of Rational-Emotive Therapy

Ellis' rational-emotive psychotherapy is oriented towards challenging a client's system of beliefs and values, clarifying irrational beliefs which perpetuate inappropriate emotional responses to specific situations. It applies "emotive and behavioristic methods...and undermines the cognitive element in self-defeating behavior" (Ellis, 1974: 55). The therapist directly confronts the client with his problems, responding with unconditional positive regard. "Because the therapist's full acceptance of him as a human being, the client is able to express his feelings much more openly than in his everyday life and to accept himself" (Ellis, 1974: 61).

At the cognitive level, the therapist 1) clarifies how specific irrational beliefs relate to the client's difficulty, or inappropriate emotions, 2) models an approach that challenges these beliefs, 3) encourages the client to replace them with more realistic ideas that will prevent future emotional difficulties from occurring, and facilitates appropriate emotions (Ellis, 1974: 56).

[2]Based upon an autobiographical account (Kopay, 1977).

This is accomplished by, first of all, using the Rogerian approach, through which the client and therapist reach an understanding of what the nature of the difficulty is. Example: The client avoids interpersonal involvement with other gay men.

Secondly, the client is confronted with a particular irrational belief (iB) which has been demonstrated as the underlying cause of the difficulty, or irrational consequence (iC). Example: "It would be awful if people discovered that I am gay" (iB). In believing that self-disclosure of his gay identity would be personally devastating, the client experiences frustrations in getting his secretive needs satisfied, and feels worthless and self-hating to the extent of hiding his identity (iC).

Once the client is able to realize how his iB undermines his difficulty, he is taught to dispute (D) his irrational belief. Example: "Why couldn't I tolerate being rejected by others? Where is the evidence that it would be awful if I were rejected? Why should I have others approve of me?"

In challenging the premises of these beliefs, the optimal outcome is the client's willingness to establish a more rational belief (rB), obtaining cognitive and behavioral effects (cE, bE). Example: "It would be unfortunate if I were rejected by others for being gay" (rB). Thus, if he asks himself, "Why is it awful if I am rejected for being gay?" he answers: "It does not

matter if others approve of me or not, it will be unfortunate if others reject me for being gay (and for being honest with them about my gayness)" (cE). Although the client may not necessarily develop a significantly greater positive regard towards his gay identity (impact of environmental factors being excluded in the theoretical construct), he at least begins to feel less self-hating and less worthless about being gay (bE).

Cognitive Aspect of R-E-T in Practice[3]

Co: Have you ever been to a gay bar?

Cl: No. I haven't found the time.

Co: You mean, you said to yourself, "I don't have time to go to gay bars"?

Cl: Yes.

Co: But that does not seem true. You have told me that you spend much time thinking about having a sexual encounter with another man, and you wondered if there was a way to "cool down" these urges.

Cl: I did; but I just don't feel like going to gay bars.

Co: Why is that?

Cl: Because someone might find out about me being gay.

Co: And it would be difficult if they rejected you?

Cl: Yes.

Co: But if you continue to avoid meeting other gay men, you will feel frustrated at not having your needs met?

Cl: Yes, I will.

Co: Then...?

[3]Adapted from Ellis, 1974: 222-223.

Cl: I guess it's because people respect me. So why risk, uh, you know...

Co: Why risk what?

Cl: Why, uh, risk being rejected for being gay?

Co: How do you believe others would feel towards you, if they discovered you are gay?

Cl: They would feel ashamed of me, and call me "queer", "faggot"...

Co: And that would be...?

Cl: Awful.

Co: Now that's what you told yourself. But would it be? If you did go to a gay bar, and someone found out and didn't accept you, would it really be awful?

Cl: No. I guess it wouldn't be.

Co: What would be unfortunate if you do not meet other gay men?

Cl: I will feel frustrated at not having my needs met.

Co: As you do now?

Cl: Yes.

Co: Okay. And you will probably continue feeling this way, unless you look at what you are telling yourself, and question yourself: "Why would it be awful? Suppose I am blatantly heterosexual, and others do not accept me; they claim that it is unnatural to not be attracted to people of the same gender. Why would I be a "queer" or a "faggot"?[4]

"iBs" and Environmental Oppression

It is essential to acknowledge the limitations of R-E-T in practice, for the underlying philosophy in the

[4]Combined Ellis' approach to disputing with a re-framing technique, in which a viewpoint is changed by attaching new meaning to an existing set of facts (Miller, 1977: 32).

discourse shows certain drawbacks when applied to the needs of gay clients. Within the context of American society, it is clearly rational in specific circumstances for a person to believe that he would be rejected, if his gay identity were to be exposed. Again, in specific circumstances, it can be very rational to view the consequences of rejection as catastrophic.

For example, gay people are typically barred from many professional careers if their identity is disclosed indiscriminately at the onset. This is catastrophic in the sense that they are denied an opportunity to make a valuable contribution in a professional career, in which they may, in fact, be more qualified for than a heterosexual, or a homosexual who successfully passes as straight. It can be considerably depressing for a gay individual (overtly homosexual), well-qualified for a professional career, to find himself drastically limited in his career selection because of discriminatory practices by employers; and disturbing to find that such a basic civil right is not even supported by federal law and regulation--e.g., Affirmative Action. However, once attaining notorious respect in a profession, the covert homosexual can be a valuable asset to the gay cause for human rights, through charity work and especially public disclosure.

Most recently, the American public has witnessed such public figures as David Kopay, ten-year professional

football player veteran, and Howard Brown, New York's former (and first) health commissioner, who publicly disclosed their gayness. Such acts are significant, as their very position and achievement in society outrightly challenges the distorted perceptions of homosexuals--particularly the stereotype of effeminacy, which leads people to view them as most suitable, and most commonly found, in such occupations as hairdressing and interior decorating.

Discerning a given client's emotional barrier in enacting his gay thoughts/feelings, and the environmental oppression which underlies his fear of exposure, the counselor's task in considering both factors clearly comes into focus. Earlier in this discussion, primary emphasis was placed upon the emotive underpinnings of a client's difficulty; for this reason, a basic understanding of environmental oppression will be outlined, which form the basis of rational beliefs.

As previously mentioned, sexual minorities are typically discriminated against in employment, particularly professional careers; this poses an obstacle in achieving their career aspirations, and may result in low goal-setting, underemployment, denial of promotions, possible demotions, and feelings of inadequacy.[5]

[5]Based upon notes generated through a discussion with Human Sexuality Advocate James Toy (University of Michigan: Ann Arbor, Mich.) in preparation for the author's participation as a gay speaker (Neuropsychiatric Institute, University Hospital: Ann Arbor, Mich.), June 7, 1977.

Given the self-evident lack of any community support for any gay relationship, and that such bonding is not institutionally recognized as valid, it is understandable that gay people may often feel most secure in gay culture. This can limit their social sphere to those who are able to accept them--some heterosexuals, other gay people, and/or transexuals. Moreover, they do not typically receive equal protection by the law, and are subject to arrest for "gross indecency" or "sexual misconduct" via entrapment; this incurs discredit to a person's reputation, and can terminate a professional career with little recourse in regaining a potential for upward mobility.[6]

From this, it can be said that clarification of the effect particular forms of environmental oppression have on a gay client's self-esteem, the rational beliefs, is an integral part of a dynamic counseling process. Although is is a significant outcome for a client to eventually accept and enact his gay thoughts/feelings with positive regard, the counselor could facilitate further progress by assisting the client's decision-making process; vis-a-vis, the consequences of indis-

[6]Case in point: Washtenaw County sheriff Thomas R. Minick admitted "there was no specific complaint...when his plain-clothes detectives arrested Manchester schools superintendent Wiliam J. Green...on a misdemeanor morals charge" (at restroom off 1-94, June 2, 1977, 2:30 A.M.). After publication of his name, Green was suspended by the board of education on June 8 (Tsang, 1977: 3).

criminately versus discreetly revealing his gay identity are evaluated.

If, for example, self-disclosure among fellow employees would realistically result in dismissal, and the client highly values his occupational position, then such an act would not be desirable. However, if denial of such disclosure would realistically interfere with his job performance and/or interpersonal relations with fellow employees, then it might be helpful for the client to re-assess the value he attributes to the occupation. Yet it is by far a modest outcome of counseling efforts, if the client's difficulty is to be treated in isolation rather than as an indicator of a macrocosmic problem within the client's environment: homophobia.

In both cases, an optimal outcome in resolving the client's intrapsychic/interpersonal difficulties would necessitate environmental intervention, in which action is taken to effectively relieve homophobic attitudes within the client's immediate environment. Implementation of this role would be most difficult if a local ordinance does not exist, issuing basic human rights for gay citizens. If this be the case, then political action needs to be instigated subsequent to environmental intervention; for without legal recourse, the counselor's interposition remains virtually powerless.

Counseling Considerations

Counselors need to challenge the myths and stereo-

types that gay people may internalize, thereby oppressing themselves with a negative self-concept. The process would involve helping the client in separating the difference between a societally-imposed identity and self-definition. There is the potential danger that clients, regardless of sexual preference, tend to appraise themselves on the basis of fulfilling significant others' and cultural expectations. For example, a gay client may view himself as a failure, as he is not inclined to heterosexual bonding--a much glorified ritual in our society, flaunted in the media, and institutionally supported. Denied such supportive public recognition, discriminated against for being unmarried, a more positive perspective is needed concerning the gay identity and lifestyle in which the value of self-definition is promoted. Guiding the client towards differentiating his difficulty from the macrocosmic problem would facilitate the client's self-acceptance, and signify the nature and extent of environmental manipulation needed to alleviate the "client's" difficulty.

In counseling gay clients, counselors need to 1) be aware of their own values and attitudes towards homosexuality, 2) possess substantial information concerning the gay lifestyle and environmental oppression, and 3) meet these above-named criteria, to the extent of elicitting verbal and non-verbal responses which demonstrate a positive regard towards gay orientation in the

counseling relationship. If we hope to assist gay clients in developing higher levels of self-esteem, we must have developed a comfortable and appreciative orientation to our own homosexual thoughts/feelings before we can successfully work with gay clients (Clark, 1977: 161). In this regard, I agree with psychotherapist Clark's assertion.

> As for the professional who says he or she has no homosexual feelings, they are about as well off as the psychotherapist who says he or she never dreams. It indicates that you are out of touch with your inner emotions and would do well to consider another profession (Clark, 1977: 162).[7]

[7] Research conducted at the Kinsey Institute provides substantial evidence that human sexuality can best be depicted as a continuum, with a very small minority on each end identified as exclusively homosexual or heterosexual.

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